THE

PRINCIPAL and PECULIAR

# NOTION

Advanc'd in a Late

# BOOK,

INTITLED,

## *The Religion of Nature Delineated;*

## Conſider'd and Refuted.

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In a LETTER to a GENTLEMAN.

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*LONDON:*

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BIBLIOTHECA BODLEIANA

SIR,

I NOW return you *The Religion of Nature delineated*, with abundance of Thanks for the Uſe of it: And to ſhew how deſirous I am to improve any Obligation you are pleas'd to lay upon me, I here ſend you a few *Remarks* I have made upon it. It is very far from my Temper to detract from the real Merits of any Author; and much more ſuch a one as this; who, I verily think, deſerves as much Applauſe as he has met with; and that is almoſt as much as he cou'd poſſibly have. But, as I have always the ſame Concern upon my Mind, when I ſee *Morality* or real Religion put upon a wrong *Baſis*, or ſupported in a weak manner, as when an inconcluſive Argument is offer'd to prove the Being of a *God*; I could not omit to examine more particularly the Foundation, upon which the Author has built the entire Scheme of *Morality*: And I was yet more inclined

to do this, becauſe I know, that however the greateſt part of his Readers may have gone haſtily into his Sentiments, many ingenious and reaſonable Men (tho ſo unhappy as to have contracted ſome Prejudices againſt all Diſtinctions of *moral Good and Evil*, or the *moral Differences* of human Actions) were too apt to conceive a degree of Pleaſure, upon ſeeing ſo rational a Man, as our Author muſt be allow'd to be, erecting his Scheme upon a *Baſis*, which they preſently obſerv'd was too weak, and incapable of ſupporting it.

If you ſhall ſee any thing in the following Remarks, which may incline you to think they deſerve, in any manner, to be communicated to the Publick; they may, probably, put ſome other Pen upon improving the Author's Notion; and, by adding the neceſſary Reſtrictions, making it ſtrong and good: which, I think, may be pretty eaſily done.

Had the *Author* himſelf been ſtill living, I ſhould, probably, have troubled him with theſe Obſervations, in a private Letter: and no one would have been fitter, or I am perſuaded, readier to alter any Miſtake than himſelf, as ſoon as he cou'd be made ſenſible of it. But ſince he is gone to his *Reſt*, we muſt be oblig'd to ſome other

other hand, if the *Error*, which I think he has been guilty of, be at all corrected.

BEFORE I proceed further, I ſhall only deſire (if your Patience will hold out ſo long) that you would read theſe *Remarks* thro, before any Judgment is made of them.

WHAT I deſign is, to confine my ſelf to the *peculiar* and *principal Notion* of our Author; and enquire whether it is right, or not. His Notion of *Morality* we have in his 9th *Prop.* p. 20. where he makes the *formal Ratio* of *moral Good and Evil* to conſiſt in an *Agreement* or *Diſagreement with Truth*: And by *Truth*, he immediately tells us, he means any Truth whatever; *any true Propoſition whatſoever, whether containing matter of Speculation, or plain Fact.* And it is viſible in every *Page*, how much he endeavours to carry this Notion thro the whole Book, and make it agree to, or comprehend all Virtues and Vices whatſoever: And as far as p. 138. we find him proving *T* guilty of an Immorality, by taking from *P* ſomething that was *P*'s; becauſe by ſuch an Act, *T* declared that to be his own which was not his own, and ſo *acted a Lye*; in which, as he adds, *conſiſts the Idea and formal Ratio of Moral*

*ral Evil.* Indeed, this is the peculiar Notion of the Book; and which diſtinguiſhes it from all others that ever were wrote upon the ſame Subject, as he himſelf tells you, p. 6. *That which is advanced in the following Papers, concerning the Nature of Moral Good and Evil, and is the prevailing Thought that runs thro them all, I never met with any where.* And yet notwithſtanding, it is obſervable, that he does not always keep ſtrictly to this Definition of his, but is as it were forced, upon particular Occaſions, to vary his Notion of *Morality*; and to conſider *Truth*, not merely as *Truth*, but according to the Importance of it, or its Influence upon the State and Circumſtances of Men: ſo that we have him, p. 52. defining *Natural Religion to be the purſuit of Happineſs, by the practice of Reaſon and Truth:* and he adds, *This is its trueſt Definition.* And again, p. 65. *I have ſhewn*, ſays he, *in what the Nature of Moral Good and Evil conſiſts*; viz. *a Conformity or Diſagreement to Truth, and thoſe things that are coincident with it, Reaſon and Happineſs.* Here therefore he takes into his Notion of *Morality*, not only the Practice of *Truth*, but the Influence alſo of that *Truth* upon the Welfare and Happineſs of Mankind. So that *Morality*, according to him, is the Practice

tice of *ſuch* Reaſon and Truth, as will have an Influence upon human Happineſs: And therefore, if there be any *ſuch Truth*, as in its nature has no influence this way, nor can have any, it has nothing to do with *Morality*, or *Morality* has nothing to do with it. And that our Author himſelf was apprehenſive there was a great deal of *Truth* of this kind, ſeems plain enough from many Paſſages; and particularly thoſe, where he ſpeaks, as he very often does, of *important* Truths, Truths *of weight*, &c. which, I think, may be fairly underſtood, as allowing that there are Truths of *no Importance*; (as it is very certain there are a great many, both ſpeculative ones and facts): Yet how ſuch a Conceſſion as this, is conſiſtent with the Definition of *Moral Good and Evil*, p. 20. it will be very hard to ſay; or rather, any one muſt plainly perceive an Abſurdity and Inconſiſtency. For ſure, if the very Eſſence of *Moral Good and Evil* lies in the mere *Agreement or Diſagreement* of our Acts with *Truth*, all Truth muſt be ſuppoſed to be *Moral*, and to have, in its tendency, an Influence upon human Happineſs: otherwiſe, the Practice or Neglect of it cou'd no ways affect human Happineſs. Indeed, let a Truth be ever ſo trifling; *e. g.* that the *Pen* I am writing with is *four* Inches long; if I know

know it, and yet aſſert it is but *three*, I am guilty of an Immorality: Why? Not becauſe I offend againſt Truth, or aſſert what is really falſe, but becauſe I aſſert what I *know* or *think* to be falſe; and ſo am guilty of ſuch an Act, as tends to breed *Diſtruſt*, *Uneaſineſs*, &c. That this is the true Reaſon, and not the other, is evident; becauſe the Guilt would be the ſame, if, tho the *Pen* was really *four* Inches in length, I, thro a miſtake, thought it was but *three*, and yet aſſerted it was *four*. Here I aſſerted what was *true*, and ſo am free from an Immorality, (according to our Author's Definition;) and yet all the World and my own Conſcience would tell me I was guilty. And this, by the way, gives me an Opportunity to obſerve, that even in *Lying* it ſelf, which of all other Vices ſeems to be the moſt direct offence againſt *Truth*, it is neither the *principal*, nor indeed any proper Circumſtance at all, that *Truth* is violated: For, as was juſt taken notice of, a Perſon may equally be guilty of *Lying*, whether he ſpeaks according to the real Truth or not, if he does but ſpeak contrary to *his own Apprehenſions* of it. This, and this only, is the ſtrictly proper Idea of a *Lye*: And therefore the Iniquity of it can never be proved, by ſaying it is a Vio-

Violation of *Truth*; for, in multitudes of Inſtances, it is not really any Violation of *Truth* at all. And if *Truth*, or the Violation of it, does not properly come into the Notion of a *Lye*; one would much leſs expect to ſee how the formal Ratio of other Vices can conſiſt in a Diſagreement with it. But to return to our Author:

I THINK his Notion of *Moral Good and Evil* makes all Truths not only *Moral*, but equally ſo; or, in other words, All Truths are in themſelves of equal Importance, according to his Definition; and the Agreement or Diſagreement of our Actions with them, equally moral or immoral. For if the moral Goodneſs or Evil of Actions conſiſts in their Agreement or Diſagreement with Truth; then, not only where there is this Agreement or Diſagreement, there is moral Good or Evil, let the Truth reſpected be what it will; but alſo, whatever Actions have an *equal* Agreement or Diſagreement, (ſuppoſing for the preſent there may be Differences in degree of ſuch Agreement or Diſagreement;) they muſt be, in the *moral* Senſe, equally good or evil: *e. g.* When I endeavour to prove another Propoſition by this falſe one, That the three Angles of a Triangle are not equal to two right ones;

I conſider the Triangle otherwiſe than it is, and the Diſagreement of my Action with the real Truth of the Triangle, is as great as it can be. This Action, therefore, is as morally evil, as when, by an Act of Charity, I refuſe to ſave a Man from ſtarving. For in this Caſe, there is not a greater Diſagreement of my Action with the Truth, than in the other: The Diſagreement is equal in both Caſes. In the former Caſe, I as much deny the Triangle to be what it is, as in the latter I deny the poor Man's Circumſtances to be what they are. And this Propoſition, that the Equality of the three Angles of a Triangle with two right ones, is to be obſerved, will be as moral, or of as great Importance, as the Truth of this other, That a Man upon the point of ſtarving, is to be relieved by Charity.

It is true, as was before obſerved, our Author often ſpeaks of Truths of *Importance*, of *Weight*, &c. and ſo may be ſuppos'd to guard againſt any ſuch Objection as this: But, as he has not put it into his Definition of *moral Good and Evil*, and ſeems only *incidentally* to talk of the different Importance of Truths, when he is as it were forced to it by the Caſes that are put; and to which no tolerable Anſwer could be given, without allowing ſuch a Difference; and yet notwithſtanding, ſtill

ſtill goes on thro the whole Book with his firſt Notion of *moral Good and Evil*, claiming to himſelf the honour of firſt diſcovering it; and ſteadily aſſerting it to conſiſt in ſuch an Agreement or Diſagreement with Truth: no one, I think, ſhould conſider this Diſtinction or Limitation, as having any thing to do with his Definition of *moral Good and Evil.*

HOWEVER, if others will be ſo kind as to put it into his Definition for him, tho they may mend it a little, it won't perhaps be perfectly right, even then. For ſtill, if the *moral Good or Evil of our Acts* depends upon the Agreement or Diſagreement of them, with Truths of *ſome Importance:* Then, I ſay, thoſe Acts in which there is an equal Agreement or Diſagreement, will be, in an equality, morally good or evil. But will this hold? *A* meets *B*, a poor Wretch at the point of ſtarving, takes notice of his caſe, ſays every thing that is right about it, and goes his way. *C* comes immediately after, ſees what *B*'s caſe is, gives him Relief, and departs. Here *A*'s Words and *C*'s Action, are ſuppos'd perfectly to agree with *B*'s Circumſtances; that is, (in the Language of our Author) they each of 'em ſay, *B*'s caſe is really what it is: and therefore, according to him, becauſe the *Agreement*

is equal, the *moral Goodneſs* of their Acts muſt be equal too. But is this true? nay, is it true, even tho we ſhould ſuppoſe, that *A* really had it not in his power to do more? it won't immediately follow, that his Act was morally as good as *C*'s. Again, *D* meets the Wretch *B*, and denies his caſe to be what it is, and calls him a Cheat, tho he knows to the contrary: *E* meets with him, and beats him to any degree. It will be impoſſible not to find both theſe Perſons equally moral, according to our Author: yet certainly they are not ſo. If *P* ſays *T*'s Horſe is his, when really he is not, he is as guilty as if he actually ſtole him: For the Diſagreement in both theſe Inſtances of *P*'s Action with the Truth of the caſe, is equal. In ſhort, for any thing there is in our Author's Definition, there is no difference betwixt a Man's talking to a *Poſt*, as if it were a Man; and beating a Man, as tho he was a *Poſt*.

'Tis true, the Author has put into his Definition, p. 20. a qualifying Word or two, in order to eſcape the Objection of his making all morally evil Acts, at leaſt, if not likewiſe all good ones, equal; when he ſays, *in ſome degree or other*. And he enlarges upon this Particular, p. 21. and tells us, he added thoſe Words, becauſe it muſt

muſt be own'd there is no ſuch thing as an *Equality of all Evil* or *all Good Actions:* He goes on, *Thoſe Truths which they reſpect, tho they are equally true, may compriſe matters of very different Importance; or more Truths may be violated one way than another.* So that here are two Caſes, in which there will be a difference in our Actions; firſt, when there is a Difference in the Truths reſpected by thoſe Actions, ſo that ſome of 'em are more important than others; and, ſecondly, when ſome Actions reſpect a greater number of Truths than others. But, in my mind, thoſe qualifying Words look very awkardly in his Propoſition; and what he ſays afterwards upon them, comes a great deal too late: For, if the very Eſſence, the *formal Ratio* (as he himſelf calls it) of *moral Evil*, lies in the Diſagreement of our Actions with *Truth*, as one Truth cannot be more truth than another; and, properly ſpeaking, there are no *Degrees* of Agreement or Diſagreement with *Truth*; but where-ever there is an Agreement or Diſagreement of any two Actions with any two Truths, that Agreement or Diſagreement muſt be *equal:* (For no Action can do more than either aſſert or deny a Truth; 'tis as impoſſible it ſhould do both, as it is thar a *verbal* Aſſertion ſhould be both poſitive and negative

gative at the ſame time. In ſhort, as a good Action aſſerts a Thing to be what it is, and does not at all deny it, ſo it is impoſſible that any other good Action, ſuppos'd to be a greater, ſhould do more with reference to the Truth reſpected by it; then, I ſay,) the Conſequence is neceſſary, that the Difference of Actions does not depend upon the different Importance of the Truths reſpected by them. *A* does an Action which diſagrees with the *Truth* reſpected by it; and, for that reaſon, his Action is morally Evil. *B* does another Action, which likewiſe diſagrees with the *Truth* reſpected by it. If *A*'s Action was evil, *becauſe* it diſagreed with the *Truth*; *B*'s Action muſt be evil too, and as evil as *A*'s, for the ſame reaſon. If this be deny'd, becauſe the Truth reſpected by *B*'s Action was not of ſo much *Importance* as that which was reſpected by *A*'s; does it not plainly follow, that the *moral Evil* of *A*'s Action does not lie only in its Diſagreement with the Truth reſpected by it, but in that and *ſomething elſe*? But, beſides that this is contrary to what the Author aſſerts, telling us quite thro the Book, that the very *Idea*, the *formal Ratio* of *moral Evil*, lies in denying a thing to be what it is; or in the Diſagreement of an Act with Truth; if,

if, at laſt, ſomething elſe is to be taken into the Notion of *moral Good or Evil*, beſides the Agreement or Diſagreement with Truth, ought he not to have told us expreſsly what that is? and, if it is ſome ſuch Word as *Important*, *Weighty*, or the like, that ought to be added, ſhould he not have been as particular in giving us ſome Rules, by which the *Importance* of Truths ought to be meaſured, and ſo known? But had he really attempted this, I know not whether we ſhould ever have ſeen his Book at all; at leaſt, I am ſure it would have been thrown into a quite different Form. The *Section* concerning *Truth*, would probably have been omitted; and that about *Happineſs*, would moſt properly have been the beginning of the Book.

So, after all, there is really only one Caſe, in which any Difference can be found in morally Good or Evil Actions; and that is, as a greater or leſs number of Truths is reſpected by them: But, certainly, this is not the only way of determining the Differences of Moral Actions.

I WOULD now obſerve, how ſtrangely our Author goes to work with the Objections, which he ſuppoſes to be made to his

his 11th *Prop.* p. 26. which is a Conſequence from the 9th *Prop.* and which I call his Definition of *Moral Good and Evil:* (tho perhaps, if I may be indulg'd a *Parentheſis* here, it might moſt properly be call'd, a Definition of *Moral Evil* only; and the Title of the Book better changed into, *The Nature of Moral Evil delineated:* For, as the Author's principal Notion is, that Vice conſiſts in Falſhood, it is eaſy to obſerve, his Endeavour throout the Book, is to reduce all Vices to this Notion, rather than to ſhew how Virtue conſiſts in the contrary. But to return,) I think no one can read his Anſwers to the Objections, which he ſuppoſes a very ignorant Perſon may make to his Doctrine, and not ſee, that the Author is extremely puzzled to give 'em a ſatisfactory Anſwer: Read eſpecially the Second, Third, and Fourth.

In the Anſwer to the ſecond Objection, is it to be *conſider'd above all*, or is it the principal Circumſtance in the *Debtor*'s Guilt, that, by refuſing to pay his Debts, he *denies* that to be his *Creditor*'s, which really is his? Juſt as much as it is to be conſidered *above all*, that when one Man baſtinado's another to Death, he denies him to be a *Man*, or to have the Senſe of Feeling.

Feeling; or, in other Words, aſſerts him to be a *Poſt*, contrary to *Truth*.

THE Anſwer to the third Objection is yet more unſatisfactory. Who would have expected, that *ſuch a Man*, as our Author appears to be, ſhou'd be capable of telling a poor Wretch, juſt upon the point of ſtarving, (and this, as we may ſuppoſe, in a *State of Nature* too) that, if he cannot get Relief in an *honeſt* way, (in as vulgar a Senſe of the Word as can be) he muſt e'en *take it as his Fate*? This, forſooth, *becauſe Truth is Truth*: That is, tho ſuch a poor Creature ſees at his Feet a penny Loaf of his Neighbour's, (and which his Neighbour does not want) he muſt by no means touch it, becauſe it is his Neighbour's, and not his own. Is that the true Reaſon? or, is it any Reaſon at all? or can any Man imagine he ſhould be capable of perceiving the Force of ſuch a Reaſon, was he reduc'd to this extreme Circumſtance? *Puffendorf*, as I remember, has the ſame Caſe, and gives an Anſwer many thouſand times righter. Our Author ſeems to have been reduc'd to this Extremity, not only by his Definition of *Moral Evil*, but his whimſical Notions alſo of *Property*, p. 131, — 134. *Puffendorf* is, I think, much more

reaſonable on that head, as well as many others.

THE Anſwer to the fourth Objection is yet more extravagant; and, methinks, a good deal odder than one would expect from a *thorow-pac'd Caſuiſt*. One wou'd not indeed wonder much at it, to find St. *Auſtin*, or a number of other Perſons, who were by chance got into a narrow way of thinking, talking at ſuch a rate; but to ſee ſo reaſonable a Man as our Author running into the ſame Cant, is aſtoniſhing. Yet it muſt be own'd, it is no more than the natural Conſequence of his main Doctrine: Nor can one need a better Argument than this, that the Conſequences of his *Top-Propoſition* being wrong, the *Propoſition* it ſelf muſt be wrong too: For nothing can follow from Truth but Truth. A Man, we may ſuppoſe, ſees a Ruffian juſt going to murder a Perſon; but the Ruffian, being in ſome doubt whether he has light of the right Perſon, asks the Man (who is ſuppos'd to be coming by) whether the Perſon he has got within his Clutches, be really ſuch a one. If he ſays *Yes*, ſtrait the Villain executes his bloody Purpoſe. But he needs not ſay *Yes*, ſays the Author; he may be ſilent: True; and the Author adds, *Silence here would con-*

*contradict no Truth.* Why? Suppoſe *A* wandring out of his Road, meets *B*, (who is ſuppos'd to know the Country) and asks him whether ſuch a Track does not lead to the Place he intends for; *B* is ſilent: *A* takes the Road, ſecurely depending upon it, that if it was not the right way, *B* would have ſaid ſo. This is the natural Signification of *B*'s Silence in ſuch a Caſe. And juſt in the ſame manner, I ſay, the Ruffian will and muſt underſtand the other Man's Silence to be equivalent to an Affirmation, and will accordingly butcher his Man; ſecurely depending upon it, that if there was a Miſtake, no Man would have omitted to tell him ſo. And thus that third Perſon would make himſelf an Acceſſary to Murder, as well by *Silence*, as if he had ſaid directly, *Yes*. And therefore, if any Truths would be contradicted this way, the ſame Truths would be all of 'em contradicted the other way. Well then, ſince he muſt neither be *ſilent*, nor ſay *Yes*, may he ſay *No*? One would think he might; for this is the only way he has to take. Nay, but he muſt not for all that: Why? Becauſe it is *contrary to Truth*; and *Truth is ſacred.* Would not one think the Man's Life was much more ſacred than *ſuch a Truth* as this? And who would not

think that ſuch a Fellow, as ſhould either by ſaying *Yes*, or by being *ſilent*, expoſe his Neighbour to the Knife of a *truculent Villain*, greatly deſerv'd, notwithſtanding all his Scruples, an equal Puniſhment with the Ruffian himſelf?

I THINK indeed, in general, it ought to be aſſerted, that even an *officious Lye* is unlawful; but not for ſuch Reaſons as this Author would give, but others of a quite different ſort. Nor can it be worth any one's while, in Speculation, to conſider and put Caſes, wherein the Obligation not to ſpeak an Untruth will ceaſe, and be no longer of any force. But, if People will needs be putting the moſt extreme Caſes, it ought not to be wonder'd at, if an extraordinary Anſwer be return'd to them. And I am perſuaded, that as to the Inſtance before us, the more virtuous any Perſon is, and the more reaſonable he is in being ſo, ſo much the more eaſily he will know what he has to do, in ſo extreme a Caſe as this.

BUT to go on with the Author. —— Does not he, in the ſame Anſwer, contradict himſelf, by his notable Diſtinction there, betwixt denying Truth *by Words*, and *by Facts*, and making the latter much more

more criminal? For wherein is the Guilt of a wicked Deed? has it not been defined to lie in *denying a Truth*? and is there not as much of this in a *verbal* Falſhood? When therefore the ſame Truth is equally affected both ways, ſure the Guilt is the ſame, or equal. There is in our Author one ſtroke more; which is ſuch an one as, I think, ſhews ſufficienlty he was driven to his Wits-end to anſwer this Objection. He ſays, one might look upon ſuch a Ruffian as *mad*, (tho contrary to *Truth*) and ſo treat him as a *Madman*. 'Tis great pity the Author has not expreſsly ſaid what this Treatment is, that one may give to a *Madman*: But ſure his meaning is, that one may tell a *Lye* to a *Madman*; and for this Reaſon, becauſe one may deceive a *Madman*, but not the *D——l*.

*Laſtly*, I THINK it may be proper juſt to obſerve, that I have here ſomewhat altered the Caſe from what it is put in the *Objection*, to which the Author returns his Anſwer; tho without perverting the Anſwer at all. But put the Caſe as the Author has it: What a pretty Obſervation is that, that to a Man who intends to murder another, and asks you where he is; tho, according to the ordinary

nary meaning of the Words, you do *know* where he is, you may notwithſtanding *deny* that you *know* it? becauſe, forſooth, in the philoſophical Senſe of the Word, (of which none but Philoſophers know any thing) it is true, that you do not *know* where any Man is, that you do not actually ſee. 'Tis certainly very well this *Word* happens to have a philoſophical Senſe, of which the *Raſcal* knows nothing. But, in good truth, is it not very odd, to put ſo great a Thing as a Man's Life upon ſuch a Quibble, or to allow of ſaving it only by ſuch a means?

HAVING thus conſider'd the principal Notion of our Author, I ſhall not deſcend to his particular Excellencies, (which indeed are very many; and the principal of them, in my mind, his Diſſertation concerning a *Providence*, p. 95.—114. where he has diſcover'd a great reach of Thought: and what he ſays concerning a *future State*, p. 199.—210.) or his Defects; but only for a Cloſe, ſhall ſay, I could be glad to have a reaſonable Man's Opinion of that Paſſage, p. 116. *As God is a pure uncompounded Being*, &c. and of that concerning *Space*, p. 74. and of that Argument, p. 185. *Again, as a Man peruſes and conſiders his own Body*, &c.

WHAT

WHAT there is in theſe *Remarks*, you are beſt capable of judging, and they are abſolutely at your Diſpoſal. For my ſelf; I think it Pleaſure enough to have ſuch an Opportunity of aſſuring you, that I am, with the higheſt Affection and Eſteem,

SIR,

Jan. 14. 172⅘.

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